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SUBJECT: BRAZILIAN COPS BUST IMMIGRANT SMUGGLING RING

1. (U) SUMMARY. A year long investigation into immigrant smuggling, dubbed Operation America, resulted in 30 arrests on November 28 and the breakup of a smuggling network responsible for moving 3,500 illegal Brazilians through Mexico to the U.S. each year. The arrests were widely reported in the national press. Gang members were active in the states of Sao Paulo, Minas Gerias, Rio de Janiero and Parana. The investigation was initiated following meetings between the Sao Paulo Fraud Prevention Unit (FPU), the Regional Security Office and the Sao Paulo State Prosecutors in 2004. Operation America involved an unprecedented level of cooperation between the Civil Police of Sao Paulo, the Federal Highway Police, the Public Ministry in the State of Sao Paulo - with the assistance of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Secret Service. END SUMMARY

2. (U) In September 2004 Sao Paulo FPU and RSO met with Sao Paulo state prosecutors to share information learned from deported Brazilians who had been victimized by immigration smugglers. Following this meeting, an investigation was launched by state prosecutor Fabio Bechara, who is responsible for the city of Guarulhos where the Sao Paulo International Airport is located. Mr. Bechara began the investigation by interviewing deportees arriving back in Brazil. Over the course of a year, the investigation grew to involve the Civil Police of Sao Paulo, the Federal Highway Police and the Public Ministry in the State of Sao Paulo -- as well as the U.S. Secret Service and Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

3. (U) These investigations uncovered a well-organized group of smugglers that operated in the four neighboring states of Sao Paulo, Minas Gerias, Rio de Janiero and Parana. According to Mr. Bechara, people in each state were responsible for different aspects of the smuggling operation. Recruitment was handled in Minas Gerais. Potential immigrants were enticed by false promises of easy employment in the United States. Most of the immigrants originated from the Governador Valadares region of that state. Additionally, gang members within Minas Gerais obtained false Brazilian passports for their clients. In Rio de Janeiro and Parana, network members provided airline tickets -- often purchased using false or cloned credit cards. Finally, Sao Paulo personnel handled transportation and housing around the Guarulhos international airport.

4. (SBU) Immigration and Customs Enforcement cooperated with the immigration smuggling aspect of the investigation. The U.S. Secret Service became involved with the discovery of the credit card cloning operation. As part of the overall operation, a second ring producing counterfeit credit cards was discovered and its printing plant shut down. Approximately 330 credit cards, laptops, desktops, and encoders were found at one suspect's residence. These credit cards were then sold to others who purchased airline tickets to Mexico. More arrests are pending.

5. (SBU) In November, before the announcement of the arrests, FPU and RSO met with Robson Feitosa da Silva from the Sao Paulo civil police. Mr. Feitosa da Silva was a primary investigator and traveled under cover to Mexico with a group of illegal immigrants. He claimed immigrants paid between U.S.\$8,000-12,000 for passage to the U.S. and would often have to mortgage their houses or enter into debt-peonage arrangements with the smugglers to pay for the journey. He also stated that American Airlines and Air France had lost close to \$1 million and \$3 million respectively due to false payment schemes. For example, a travel agency in Parana would make a reservation, payment would then be made in Rio with a cloned credit card and the ticket would finally be issued out of Sao Paulo.

5. (U) COMMENT: While the investigation began as a result of the Consulate's meetings with state prosecutors, the discovery of the use of cloned credit cards to buy airline tickets led to the creation of the larger investigation that resulted in the arrests reported herein. While it is encouraging to see a qualitative success result from cooperation among Brazilian police forces, Brazilian government agencies across state lines, and U.S. law and consular services, it is worthy to note that the Federal Police in Governador Valadares have strongly denounced the

operation. Mr. Rui Antonio da Silva, the head of the Federal Police in Governador Valadares, criticized both the Sao Paulo civil police and the Federal Highway police for superseding their jurisdiction.

McMullen